



ALBUM PRODUCTIONS & CHINESE SHADOWS  
Present

# SAN ZIMEI – THREE SISTERS

a film by **WANG Bing**

France – Hong Kong 2012 / 153 min. / Color / Documentary

**SALES**

CHINESE SHADOWS

[contact@chineseshadows.com](mailto:contact@chineseshadows.com)

## SYNOPSIS

---

Three little sisters, YING (10 years old), ZHEN (6 years old) and FEN (4 years old) live alone in a small village in the high mountains of the Yunnan region. The father works in the town a few hundred kilometers down the mountain and the mother has left long ago. The little girls don't go to school, spending their days working in the fields or wandering in the village.

Quite and patient, YING takes care of her two sisters and does most of the fieldwork. Sometime, they help their grandfather and aunt in exchange for a meal.

One day the father returns from the city. Worrying that his girls would grow up without someone taking care of them, he decides to take with him to the city the younger ones and leave YING alone under the supervision of her grandfather. YING now has to adapt to an even more solitary life.

## THE BACKGROUND

---

The film has been shot in a small Chinese village in the East Mountains of the Yunnan province, at 3,000 meters high. The village is called XI YANG TANG (the pond to wash the sheep) where around 30 families reside there.

Because of the altitude, no grains grow there. Potatoes become the only food possible for men and animals. In the middle of the village flows a small river, the only drinkable water of the neighborhood. Down in the valley, a school is organized for the village kids to attend where three teachers have been sent by the central government.

The houses of the village are constructed with cob walls and straw roofs. Each family owns only a few worn wood furniture and some rare field tools. The houses are dark and humid.

Like many other places in China, young adults have left for the cities looking for a better life, leaving the kids in the village, along with the elderly and few adults who couldn't leave. Dressed in shredded clothes, the villagers work daily in the fields while the kids and elderly take care of the animals. Living alone with the elderly, the kids are left unattended and with little to no education. Most of them stop school when they start grade 6, as college is too expensive for the families. Some of them can't even go to school since they have to work in the fields.

Every family has 3 to 4 children. Generally, the families neglect the girls. Before their 14th birthday, the parents choose for them a husband whom they will marry a few years later. Since life in the village is quite tough, the girls try to find a husband from a more prosperous area in order for their family to receive more gifts from his parents. The boys of the village have difficulties finding wives, the only way would be for their parents to propose an early

match when the two are still children. They will then have to offer gifts to the girl's family early on as well as offer help if her family has any problems (financial or other).

It's in that village that we will discover the daily life of a family of 3 daughters.

The father, 37 years old, has a very violent nature. A few years ago, his wife left the village, abandoned her 3 children and has never heard from her since then. With his piece of land and his two pigs, the father tries to feed his small family. Due to the tough weather in this high mountain area, potato harvest varies every year. He could never be certain if he would have enough for the year. Thus he has decided to try his luck near the cities of the valley, leaving the girls alone in the house.

The three girls, underfed, look much younger than they actually are. YING, who is 10 but looks more like 8, went to school for two years before dropping out to take care of her two sisters when her mother left the family. Every morning she helps them get up, cooks some potatoes and feeds the pigs. She is in charge of the house. Her daily schedule is simple but quite loaded. She has replaced the mother. She has become the one who carries the moral burden of this poor family in despair. Smart and mischievous, the second daughter is always on the move trying to escape the control of her elder sister. 6 years old, but looks like 4, ZHEN doesn't seem to believe in the authority of YING. She is always looking for an occasion to play and have fun.

FEN, the youngest, is 4 years old and always covered with mud. Quiet and lonely, she follows her sisters while being in her own world.

The film follows these main characters during 6 months, the simple reality of the life of these girls and shows how humanity survives in the middle of a very hostile environment.

## DIRECTOR'S NOTES

---

This film introduces an ordinary poor peasant's family and their daily lives. We follow the relation between the family members, how in such misery men are capable of adapting themselves in order to survive, how even in the middle of nothing children manage to grow up, how the daily minute things are mountains for those 3 girls.

When I first met the family about 2 years ago, I was touched by the incredibly difficult situation in which those kids were growing up. It reminded me of my childhood, and the poverty I had to face and adapt to. It's an inhuman world where these young human beings live like animals, yet at the same time so human as the bond exists between them helps them cope with life. This is why I want to testify about the reality of these poor peasants' children's life in contemporary China. The image of modernity, of economic development, and of an almost occidental world that China is presenting nowadays has slowly made the other side – the human side – disappear from our sight. What about the humanity in all of that? Those who can't go to school because of the lack of money? And those who survive without much hope to benefit from the economical growth?

I didn't want to make an ethnographical study of the family. I wanted to leave the experience of this life directly to the audience, with the idea of a direct comprehension of the universality of those children's lives, a more objective and direct image of their reality, in order to feel and understand in their inner self the intimate feelings of this family.

That's why I filmed with steady shoots and cameras to amplify all the details of their existence and of the duration and time of their daily schedule. We are the witnesses of their primitive life.

The story of this film is the pure and simple one of human beings.

## DIRECTOR'S BIOGRAPHY

---

Born in Xi'an, Shaanxi Province, China, in 1967, Wang Bing studied photography at the Lu Xun Academy of Fine Art (1992) and cinematography at Beijing Film Academy (1995). He began his independent filmmaking career in 1999.

### **FILMOGRAPHY**

#### **2013 'TIL MADNESS DO US PART (FENG AI)**

Documentary, 227 minutes.

Venice Film Festival, Out of Competition

Toronto IFF

Vancouver IFF

Busan IFF

Doclisboa 2013, Competition

Viennale

Copenhagen CPH:DOX

Festival des 3 Continents of Nantes, La Mongolfière d'argent Award

#### **2012 GUDU – ALONE**

Documentary, 89 minutes

Black Movie Festival (Switzerland) 2013 Critic Award

Rotterdam International Film Festival, 2013.

#### **2012 SAN ZIMEI – THREE SISTERS**

Documentary, 153 minutes

Venice Film Festival, Orizzonti Best Film Award

Doc Lisboa (Portugal), Best Film Award

Festival des 3 Continents (France), Best Film Award, Audience Award

Dubai IFF, Best Documentary Asia Africa award

Fribourg FIFF, Grand prix «le regard d'or», Ecumenical jury award, E-changer award, Don Quijote Award

#### **2010 THE DITCH**

Feature Film, 113 minutes

Venice Film Festival, Official Competition

#### **2008 COAL MONEY (TONG DAO)**

Documentary, 52 minutes.

International competition, Cinema Du Reel, Paris, France,

#### **2008 CRUDE OIL (YUAN YOU)**

Documentary film installation, 14 hours.

Supported by Hubert Bals Fund Rotterdam.

Premiered at Rotterdam International Film Festival, 2008.

Hong Kong Film Festival, 2008.

#### **2007 FENGMING, A CHINESE MEMOIR (HE FENGMING)**

Documentary, 184 minutes.

Cannes Film Festival, 2007 - Official Selection.  
Toronto International Film Festival, 2007.  
Rotterdam International Film Festival, 2008.

**2007 BRUTALITY FACTORY (BAOLI GONGCHANG)**

Short in the anthology STATE OF THE WORLD.  
Cannes Film Festival, 2007 - Directors' Fortnight.

**1999 - 2003 WEST OF THE TRACKS (TIE XI QU)**

Documentary in three parts, 554 minutes.

Part 1: RUST *(244 minutes)*

Part 2: REMNANTS *(178 minutes)*

Part 3: RAILS *(132 minutes)*

Lisbon International Documentary Festival, 2002 *(Grand Prize)*

Marseille Festival of Documentary Film, 2003 *(Grand Prize)*

Three Continents Nantes Film Festival, 2003 *(Golden Balloon, documentary section)*

Yamagata International Documentary Festival, 2003 *(Robert and Frances Flaherty Prize)*

## CREDITS

---

Director	WANG BING
Cameraman	HUANG WENHAI, LI PEIFENG, WANG BING
Editor	ADAM KERBY, LOUISE PRINCE
Sound	FU KANG, ANTOINE FOURNIER
Producer	SYLVIE FAGUER, MAO HUI
Production	ALBUM PRODUCTIONS CHINESE SHADOWS
In association with	ARTE France – LA LUCARNE FUORI ORARIO – RAI CINEMA